

"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

# The Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin

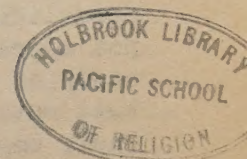
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## The Church's Part in Building the Rural Parish

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There are three main streams of life in the rural church as an organization. Brought together, they assure its well-being. These are an effective ministry, a responding congregation, and a cooperating denomination. Deficiency in any one of these factors leads to what is known, for want of a better word, as the rural church problem.

An effective ministry is usually assured to a collaborating congregation. They may, and often do, succeed in developing local programs, not because, but in spite of, their denominational leadership. Without making apologies for poor preachers and like congregations in the small community, and there are plenty, the guilt for these conditions rests to a great extent with those who are the pilots at the church's helm. To within very recent times, and excepting predominately rural denominations, church leaders have been plagued with a prejudice in favor of impressive city performances which has robbed them of needed patience with the deep-seated ills of the staggering rural parish. However, a series of rural pastors' "woodshed meetings" has brought to light, by means of reasonable actions in urban-dominated gatherings, the presence of a challenge in hitherto unsuspected regions. No longer is the country church considered a bothersome appendix, but a vital part in the denominational organism. As new leaders come to the top, urban provincialism has no longer a place in their thinking and the country church is assured of a square deal through the understanding attitude of such. A brief analysis of this transition is here desirable.

### 1. What are the Marks of Such Leadership?

a. It acknowledges the fact that the city population is dying for want of children. It knows that the average age in the city is steadily rising, and that the thousands of vacant seats in grade schools speak of an uncertain future for the church, unless interest is revived in the rural areas where America's net increase in population is being reared.

b. It acknowledges that the greater part of the church's leadership hails from the small community by reason of (1) the country's greater fecundity, and (2) the country's more natural and therefore more normal family life, not forgetting its Christian aspects. It knows that the population of the church's orphanages are not so much "orphans" as they are the products of broken up city homes with both parents living. It knows that it is in the country where conducive work and living conditions provide

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for home life in less restricted ways than the city affords, and where people marry while still young and enjoy their children's parade for whom the "orphanage" is not.

c. It acknowledges that the farmer was first in God's mind when he created man and said, "Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth, and subdue it," (Genesis 1, 28) and, "I have given you every herb and every tree, to you it shall be for food." (Genesis 1, 29) He is a wise church leader who sees these basic facts in human and divine priorities, therefore deserving the church's thoughtful consideration.

## 2. How is Such Leadership Motivated?

a. By a sense of realism which recognizes that not only empires, which neglected farm life as a nation's backbone, have fallen, but also that denominations which have not appreciated their hinterlands have suffered tremendously for such neglect. A study of the federal religious census makes this plain. There we see that some of the well established churches, grown respectable in the course of generations by placing their emphasis upon city life, have lost, taken together, more than 30,000 churches in a ten-year period. While on the other hand, the churches whose chief interest has been and is in rural districts and in the poor man's religious life, with usually large families, have increased as much as 200 per cent during the same period. It is the story of the church over and over again, today as it was decades ago when other labels swept the country by revivals.

b. By a sense of penitence in view of lost fields and opportunities. Great eagerness has been shown, and rightly so, in bringing the blessings of the Gospel to distant lands. But while doing this, the millions living in poorly churching rural districts in this country should have been more noticed by those who stayed behind. The new leadership will not be handicapped by this blind spot in the church's eye.

c. By a sense of fearlessness in doing the unusual. The pattern of church life today has for its greater part been cut out by past generations. Any deviation therefrom is looked upon with suspicion by the extreme conservatives. The rural church, in claiming the central place in the small community, must branch out to cover its entire life. With such a necessity the city church is not concerned in the maze of specialized urban functions. The Christian family in a Christian community is characterized by acceptable living conditions. Poverty and sickness are no longer looked upon as God's will, but as the lack of proper interest on the part of those who have the power to improve things, among which the church with its power of the Gospel is not the least. The new leadership knows this. It is revealed by their readiness to work "Toward a Christian Rural Civilization."

## II

### FIELDS OF ACTION FOR THE CHURCH AT LARGE

It is agreed that in the country as elsewhere in the church's work, the local pastor is the key person. All efforts on the part of the church, and the most burning desire for Christian achievement on the part of the congregation will come to naught without his effective leadership. This taken for granted, a denomination's evident and particular duties to the rural church shall now be touched upon briefly. There are for the church three distinct approaches, converging to be true, but which must be considered separately to evaluate their meaning and relative importance.

#### 1. Formulation of a Program for the Rural Church in General

As every denomination has a set program for missions, Christian education, and other branches of religious activity, it calls now for the establishment and active support of a town and country department as has already been done in a number of major groups. The least which the rural church and their pastor can expect of their denominations



national leadership is an open mind. No one will dispute this claim. But, many leaders who ought to be in the picture have worries older than the noises now coming from "God's Back Pasture," which then must wait. Granted an open mind on the part of those who have the power to give and to withhold, to promote or to hold back, these are the things which can justly be expected in behalf of a general rural life program on the part of the responsible denominational leadership.

#### A. Provide for Surveys

No doctor will apply remedies unless he has examined the patient. The rural church is sick in many parts and no mere hurried diagnosis, with a poultice here and a hypo there, will bring the healing. Yet, that is exactly how some have thought that reviving can be effected, following an unintelligent, cast-iron practice. The church should provide guidance and forms for local pastors to take the measure of their congregations and the fields in which they are working. There is a difference whether the people are mostly owners or tenants; whether the community is isolated or close to centers of population; and on what kind of land these people work. The church should know what age groups predominate and should thereby provide a perennial index of the source of future adult membership for city churches and cultivate the same. So far, church statistics have dealt mostly with counting heads and dollars without any reference to what bodies these heads were attached, or how these dollars have been earned.

If every denomination will provide the simple mechanism for local surveys, no denomination will be left long in doubt concerning strength and weaknesses among her charges. The least the country pastor can expect of his leaders is a comprehensive and definite plan for the fortification of the rural Kingdom.

#### B. Sponsor Standards of Excellency for the Rural Church

Today's rural church is without a measuring stick to take its own size. Her only guide for comparison is the city church, and therein lies a danger. While fundamentally the function of the church is identical in both city and country, the world out of which the farmer comes to God's house is different from that of the man in industry, business, or the professions. Talents, attitudes, and expectations differ widely among the two groups. This difference must be recognized through establishment of standards of excellency attainable by either group in regard to:

(1) The Ministry. To say that anyone will do who has passed through the conventional seminary course would be denying the requirements and diversities of human nature. The town or country church, as a distinct section of the whole church, must be manned by pastors who have learned to appreciate the significance of rural life as related to other spheres in the existence of church and state. The church at large must define its ideal rural pastor and provide for his making.

(a) Trained Lay-Leadership and Readers. The fact that most rural parishes require the multiplications of one pastor into two or more separate shepherds of so many congregations means spreading out his limited energy so thin that the work cannot but suffer. Here it is where dormant talents in the rural congregation must be brought to the fore. Lay people are active in the church in so many ways, in church school, in music, in auxiliaries, not to speak of their participation as leaders in community and farm organizations. The talent is there. The question is of giving selected men proper additional training. This holds particularly true for denominations who teach "the universal priesthood of all believers."

Not only does this apply to men found within the rural churches, but also to the excess talent with which most city churches are loaded down, without sufficient outlets for such energies. There are many men in the cities whose work throughout the week has made it their second nature to deal with people, and who with their Christian background, and years of listening to sermons and being active as deacons or council-



men are mastering sufficient technique to supply on Sunday small rural churches within travelling distance, who are either without a pastor, or whose pastor needs assistance to cover his parish effectively. For all of this the church will have to make the lay ministry a part of its program.

(3) Buildings, Grounds, and Equipment. The lack of standards of church-wide acceptance has led in some small communities to the erection of monstrosities in the line of church buildings. Though country churches may be ever so small and simple, the same amount of material and labor that can produce an atrocity of a public meeting place can form that material into a distinctive house of God. It is up to each denomination to make available for the small church building project such plans as will guide them to the construction of a practical and worshipful sanctuary.

(4) Finance. It is well known that the per-capita contributions in predominantly farmers' congregations are more often than not lagging behind those of the city church. The reason for this is not an inherent and universal niggardliness, as it may seem, but the less efficient method of gathering contributions. In the city, used to system and regularity in daily business transactions, including payment of salary or wages, contributions are gathered more efficiently. There are still such country churches where the loose offering is the pastor's sole cash income, until toward the end of the year, when an attempt is made to raise the balance of the agreed upon amount. Denominational interest would go far in rectifying this injustice by authorizing field workers or successful neighboring pastors to sit in with the administrative church board and counsel them toward greater smoothness in their financial machinery, if such it could be called.

Along with the duplex envelope system the church should advocate the Lord's Portion system, commonly known as the "Lord's Acre." Asking all members, men, women, and children, to set aside a part of the natural products of the farm, from the yield of the land to the eggs laid on Sunday, will bring more returns, gladly brought, than any weekly cash-on-the-barrel-head payment for the preaching—at least in most congregations. Though this procedure is particularly fruitful in behalf of special projects, its use has solved financial difficulties wherever an earnest and devoted use has been made. It is up to each denomination to advocate it far more than has been done in the past. It is a tried and proven method.

(5) A Community Program. Before the present era the church was the center of community life and the minister the best equipped and situated person to provide the guidance. Recalling the stories of Kingsley, Oberlin and Grundtvig, to mention but a few of the outstanding rural characters, will make this plain. That condition is still with us, though not generally recognized. A volume could be written on the work of outstanding rural clerics and Christian laymen whose interest in social and economic problems and whose initiative are lifting backward rural communities to higher levels of living.

But such efforts have generally not been credited as belonging to the legitimate sphere of the Church of Christ which, it is claimed, is concerned with spiritual things only, giving directions while keeping the skirts clean. But as Christ was hurt in His feelings in His day, when He said, "Why call ye me teacher, and do not the things I tell you," so He must look today upon endless teaching which falls short of translating the words into deeds. It is therefore the duty of the denomination not only to give silent consent, but to facilitate the cooperation of rural congregations in all community programs which have for their purpose the advancement of rural people.

#### C. Observation of Rural Life Sunday

There has been an appreciable improvement in the acceptance of this special day for recalling the farmer's work as God's most important stewardship, and his church as a source of strength in the building of God's Kingdom. Nevertheless, in comparison



With other promotional programs in denominational setups, no church has even approached the fervor with which the leadership in the Roman Catholic Church has fostered the development of the rural idea through a new emphasis in the observation of Sunday Rogate.

Liturgical churches, adhering to the observation of the historical church year, could have no difficulty in reviving the ancient meaning of Sunday Rogate as the day blessing the seed and invoking God's mercy upon a fruitful season. This leads to the question, how may Rural Life Sunday, the Fifth Sunday after Easter, be promoted most effectively?

(1) By Giving It Wide Publicity. This can be done through the denominational press, through special folders, distribution of special service forms for Sunday schools, young people's societies, men's organizations and the women's auxiliaries and mission circles. All of these receive periodically prepared program materials for every worthwhile cause. The country church's cause must now be added where this has not already been done.

(2) Exchange of Pulpits. Every progressive minister is anxious to put variety into the message that sounds from his pulpit. To have a guest speaker from a different sphere of activity is one of the means to accomplish this. Wherever possible, the church should encourage pastors in city and country to exchange on this day and be guest speakers in the other man's church. Where such practice has been endorsed and lived up to by neighboring ministers it has been beneficial to both pastors and people, each one deriving a spiritual thrill from the experience.

(3) Special Offerings for Rural Missions. Informed city congregations know that the bulk of their membership hails from the small communities surrounding them. From there the young people pour into urban centers for occupations which the country does not offer. They come to the city ready-made by the country church for full-pledged membership, the city receiving the finished product, so to speak. The stronger such churches in the hinterland are, the more benefit the city will derive. For such reason the city churches with adequate financial resources (and the customary efficiency in handling finances makes them usually adequate for missionary purposes) should take as much interest in struggling, isolated, small congregations on this continent, as they do in far off, foreign projects. Going into "all" the world, includes the world at our very doorsteps in which most of our church members are being born, and unchurched without number would welcome the leadership of the church for a better world, both now and hereafter.

#### D. Conventions, Conferences, and Institutes

Get-togethers are stimulators; they focus attention; they incite to action. It is no credit to the Protestant Church that most of her rural ministers have to seek information and encouragement for their work at secular gatherings. Wrapped in traditional viewpoints and procedures, most governed by an urban complex, the rural pastor and his congregation have often been looked upon as a necessary, but bothersome, annex which should be taught the art of moving their church to town, stock, lock and barrel, or whatever you would say in the case of a church. However, numerous Christian lay people with a better insight into the destiny of the rural community have used their available facilities to win ministers into acceptance of the challenge which rural life presents. Foremost among these, in numbers and equipment, by reason of their special field of interest, their training and research, combined with Christian devotion to the cause, are leaders and teachers in state agricultural colleges. Through their efforts, though sometimes frustrated by denominational indifference, it has been possible to establish special short courses or summer camps for country preachers. These have found in such surroundings understanding for their special problems which their own churches deny them. There they have derived new courage to cling to difficult situations and prove their worth under adverse conditions.



Wholehearted cooperation with the Christian Rural Fellowship and the Committee of Town and Country of the Federal Council of Churches and Home Missions Council would be all that is necessary to assure every denomination in all parts of our nation various opportunities for conference to express their interest in safeguarding the spiritual life of those with whom we are here concerned.

## 2. Formulation of a Program for the Country Congregation

### A. Assistance in Denominational Colonization

Most prosperous rural congregations are found where the particular denomination is, colony-like, strongly represented. Driving along the nation's highways and spotting in the countryside a stately church edifice with steeples, bells and all, topped off by a cross, you know at once that you are in the midst of a solidly settled Catholic or Lutheran community. In case it is an impressive and well kept meeting house that forces its attention upon you, it may belong to Friends, Mennonites or some other group preferring that type of building. But, whosoever's church it may be, its presence indicates that you are in the midst of a homogeneous community of like religious persuasion. Their farms usually reflect prosperity. Land in such communities, if a change is made in ownership, passes from one member of the church to another, seldom, if ever, to one not belonging to that particular religious group.

Though at first sight this may not be democratic procedure, it certainly produces in the end a religious life and economic balance of which a denominationally cut-up region is not capable. Most forced attempts to bring various religious convictions under one head of either a union or federated church lack the desired cohesion and authority, all depending upon the strength of the pastor. What one man may be able to build, another, short of the gift to preserve unity in the midst of diversity, may not be able to hold together. All of which goes to say that each denomination should endeavor to cultivate strong rural communities of their own. This does not mean neglecting fellowship with other Christians, but rather helping and assisting them to achieve similar aspirations, and all respecting and loving each other as builders of a better rural America. This may be done through:

(1) Maintenance of a Central Clearing Office. Such an office would build a list of available farms through the cooperation of local key men who would keep track of offerings made. Land seeking people would inquire through the clearing house where a farm home might be available in a community resembling their desire. Though it is a long range program, in the end it will benefit all denominations and rural regions through an increase in owner-operated farms which in turn represent the support of a strong and stabilized rural church, the cradle of the church at large.

(2) Stressing the Follow-up System. The war has taught what can be done in regard to keeping in touch with members of the faith while they are absent from the home church. Through clearing houses the pastor nearest the location of soldiers on this continent have systematically been notified of their presence and addresses. Such system, while partly in use among some groups before the war, should be intensified for civilian use when the great migration back to normalcy is in full swing and rural regions will become the attraction to the home-seeker in an ever-increasing decentralization of industry and the desire for farms and subsistence homesteads. In this maze of domestic readjustments it is up to church leadership to provide the mechanics for keeping in touch with her members. Tracing and possible directing them will be the church's task.

(3) Financial Assistance. This is an old practice among certain religious groups. Where the colony uses an all inclusive pool or common treasury, their increase in population as they reach maturity will automatically be provided with new land paid for out of that treasury. Others have established credit associations for the purpose of making character loans for keeping on the land the promising youths from within



their midst. In brief, it is the principle of church extension loans carried a step further to include the Christian farm home.

### B. A Central Agency for Preaching Missions

Periodic emphases in Gospel preaching are invigorators in any community. Observance of special Lenten services, thronged by otherwise indifferent, is an illustration. The country church is in need of such seasons of intensified preaching of the Gospel for the edification and training of the existing membership and the arousing of others to the challenge of Christ in the world. This needs change of voice in the pulpit.

It can be done by either the organization of Gospel teams of specially trained men under the auspices of a national commission on evangelization and home missions, or, regional leaders of the church may bring together qualified preachers from their own district for well defined parts in such periodic congregational programs of evangelism. This applies also, with modification, to territories which are without a regular ministry and church buildings and are in need of having their religious life developed.

### C. Literature in Keeping with Rural Needs

Today, the bulk of denominational literature, promotional and otherwise, is geared to the urban mind. This is a universal complaint on the part of rural people everywhere. Independent publishing houses have recognized and met this need long ago, and thereby have captured a great deal of the business that otherwise would go to the denominational press. Rural people must be addressed in the spoken as well as in the printed word with that point of view in mind which is a part of rural life. Specifically is this felt in the case of:

(1) General Information. Neither city, town, or even the open country itself, is fully aware of the vital importance which the small community carries in the national scene. The facts must be made known to all concerned. When both city and country people come to realize their unavoidable interdependence, a great stride in the stabilization of Kingdom work will have been made.

(2) The Promotion of Rural Practices. One of the most productive fields in rural promotion has been the adoption of the Lord's Acre plan. Through it, financial problems in country churches have been solved, debts paid, and new projects made possible, including greater benefits for missionary purposes. But even this needs more educational campaigning, particularly through leaflets and the willingness of the denominational press to lend its assistance. Similar support must be given to rural youth programs, which have to go further in practical applications than the city needs in such respects, owing to the diversity of the two forms of social expression. The ramifications of 4-H Club work may serve as an example of a splendid means for merging everyday work situations with the guidance of the church's youth program. Concerning these possibilities the church at large must give up the attitude of keeping her distance, considering raising a steer or putting up jam as incompatible with the spiritual nature of the church.

(3) A Rural Periodical. Several denominations have recognized the value of this means and the Committee on Town and Country of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America and the Home Missions Council inaugurated an interdenominational monthly "The Town and Country Church" in 1943. The National Catholic Rural Life Conference has set the standard for such publications by their quarterly "Land and Home." Other churches will have to follow to maintain for their own rural servants that slant which regional conditions necessitate for the preservation of local and sectional interest.

### 3. The Country Pastor

An effective ministry in any congregational situation is the one prerequisite without which all other efforts would come to naught. To assure the church such a ministry does not come by accident or good luck. Such a ministry must be won, trained, inspired, and rewarded. This calls for a well-worked out plan covering the country pastor's ministry from beginning to end. The church will have to do away with the idea that a conventional seminary course, or no course in residence at all, will be sufficient background for what the country pastor needs by way of preparation. Also, the idea must be wiped out which classified ministers into the good and the lesser brand, it being understood that the latter are usually found in the country. Here are some of the means whereby the church could contribute toward the achievement of a more effective rural ministry:

#### A. Opportunities for Special Training

(1) Before Ordination. Like any special skill in any other profession, the ministry has its special fields for which special training is required. The foreign missionary must prepare himself for the country in which he will work. The professor in the seminary concentrates upon the subject he plans to teach. Each worthwhile pastor has a field in which he excels because of his special



adaptation by either training or a natural bent. But the fruitful country pastor cannot be the product of a hit-or-miss preparation. Apart from the sanctifying grace of the Lord which calls him into the country, the seminary shares in the responsibility to offer him the best possible chance for concentration on small community requirements. This may be done through: (a) Definitely outlined courses included in the seminary curriculum; (b) Substitution reading courses for which credit is given; (c) Acceptance of work done in agricultural schools which bears directly upon making a better trained and informed rural ministry. Familiarity with such subjects as rural sociology and economics changes the congregation's face to the man in the pulpit to such an extent that his message and pastoral work will be greatly influenced for better work; (d) Assisting students to attend rural pastors' summer camps and courses; (e) Giving preference to such seminarians to supply rural churches during their years in school who in the end plan to give their life's service to the small community.

(2) Refresher Courses for In-Service Pastors. Denominations should provide the opportunity of periodic continuation schools for their pastors, or official sanction to institutes sponsored by others.

(3) Denominational Circulating Libraries. Economic handicaps (which should not exist) among country preachers often account for an inadequate library. This in turn may reflect upon paucity in the pulpit, depriving the minister of his coveted reputation as the best informed man in the community. Great distances to public libraries, as it may be the case, make access to desirable books rather difficult. With postage on books as low as it is, the church should see to it that the best books helpful to the spiritual strength of the country parson should be brought within reach of his R.F.D. mail box.

#### B. Economic Safeguards for the Pastor's Family

One of the greatest fears to make the rural ministry a life's work has been the economic insecurity attendant to many rural situations. Particularly in regard to the children's future, this has always worked as a deterrent to make such ministry a vocation for keeps. To remove the specter of uncertainty, various safeguards ought to be offered, such as:

(1) A Guaranteed "Living Wage." Some denominations have gone far in readjusting ministerial salaries by suggesting contributions from men in the higher salary brackets. Home missions boards have done well in augmenting the finances of disadvantaged men. The church ought to keep on studying and relieving where it is needed, if she wants her country churches supplied in as permanent a fashion as the city pulpit usually is.

(2) Old Age Security. If the church can say to her servants, "You stand by us and we shall stand by you," much will have been achieved. Here again, many plans are used to accomplish this, but the majority of rural pastors still look into a problematic and uncertain old age.

(3) Child Allowances. Where the restricted income of a country pastor prevents him seeing his children through the same educational opportunities which he himself and the mistress of the manse have enjoyed, then scholarships in denominational schools ought to be made available. The church's concern for the children of foreign missionaries could serve here as a pattern.

(4) Scholarships. Some pastors stay away from continuation studies because their means do not allow it. If there are deserving men, the inspiration and information which graduate work affords should not be denied them on this account. In the end, their congregations and the church at large will gain by it.

(5) A Course in Ministerial Economics. However much money may be put into the hands of an individual, it is no assurance that it will be used to best advantage. Preachers have a reputation of being poor accountants, though not all. Some men, (and that includes those in the city), no matter how much may go through their hands, at the end of the year are not better off and have no more to show for their money than some others whose fortunes have not been so good. For this reason it would do no harm if advice for conservation of parsonage funds would be made available to such who desire it and who are at a loss to know how to make a dollar work for what it is worth. This may sound mercenary, but it is reality just the same.

A Word in Conclusion. For all these pages we have spoken on what the church should do for the country church. The question may now be raised, who among those who could do these things will get hold of this article and read it in detail? To be sure there will not be many. So--what good will it do? This it will do. If the man in the country parsonage has taken the time to make himself acquainted with these suggestions, (and they were gathered mostly at the fireside of rural pastors), he may remember them at conventions and conferences. By means of discussions and the passing of resolutions, their purpose will finally reach those who have the power to act. If sufficient convincing words and action will reach denominational leadership, in the end, the democratic basis of American church life will assure the nation, through consecration to the country church's cause, an efficient rural ministry, which is the key to the whole problem.